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Today

GARY W. LLOYD, Editor

"Our country is the world – our countrymen are mankind."

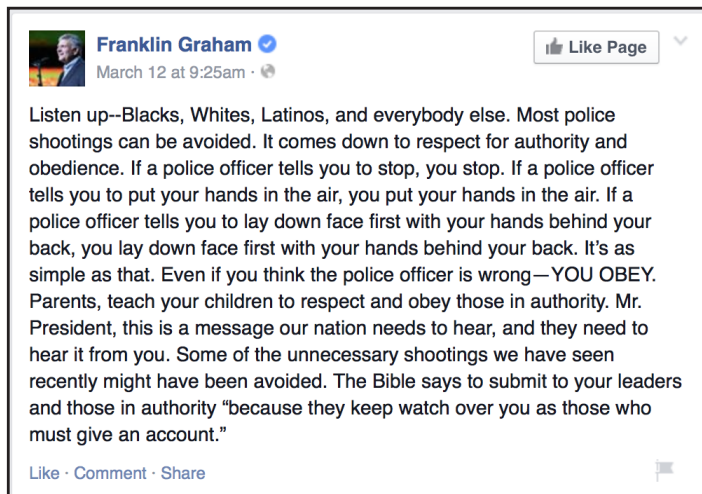
L.D. BLISS, Printer

The strawless simplicity of Franklin Graham

"The only simplicity for which I would give a straw is that which is on the other side of the complex — not that which never has divined it."

**-Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.,
U.S. Supreme Court Justice**

The beginning of wisdom, we know according to Proverbs 9:10, is the fear of the Lord. The beginning of wisdom rarely starts with the phrase "Listen up." On March 12, at 9:25 AM, that's exactly how Franklin Graham chose to begin a Facebook post: "Listen up--Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and everybody else."



His main point was that "most police shootings can be avoided" if "YOU OBEY" (capitalization his.) Parents must teach their disobedient children to obey; President Obama must teach the same to his disobedient citizens. Graham ends his appeal, as one might expect of a preacher: "The Bible says to submit to your leaders and those in authority 'because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.'"

Graham's post was shared over 83,000 times and it scored

almost 200,000 likes. Others however were hurt and offended by it. Leroy Barber, chairman of the Christian Community Development Association, initiated an open letter to Graham and recruited thirty other reputable signatories. (Their letter is too lengthy to reproduce here, but you can read it at: <http://sojo.net/blogs/2015/03/19/open-letter-franklin-graham>.) In their main paragraph, they state:

Frankly, Rev. Graham, your insistence that "Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and everybody else" "Listen up," was crude, insensitive, and paternalistic. Your comments betrayed the confidence that your brothers and sisters in Christ, especially those of color, have afforded your father's ministry for decades. Your instructions oversimplified a complex and critical problem facing the nation and minimized the testimonies and wisdom of people of color and experts of every hue, including six police commissioners that served on the president's task force on policing reform.

They also took issue with Graham's use of scripture:

As your brothers and sisters in Christ, who are also called to lead the body, we are disappointed and grieved by your abuse of the Holy Scriptures. You lifted Hebrews 13:17 out of its biblical context and misappropriated it in a way that encourages believers to acquiesce to an injustice that God hates. That text refers to church leadership, not the secular leadership of Caesar.

Are you also aware that your commentary resonates with the types of misinterpretations and rhetoric echoed by many in the antebellum church? Are you aware that the southern slavocracy validated the systematic subjugation of human beings made in the image of God by instructing these enslaved human beings to "obey their masters because the Bible instructed them to do so?"

Commentators in Graham's Facebook comment stream

rose to his defense, most consistently with the very legitimate question: “Oh really? What advice would you have someone follow instead?” No one WANTS to see these shootings re-occur, certainly not the police themselves.

It’s interesting to me that people (like Graham and his defenders) who exhort black parents “teach your children to respect and obey those in authority” assume that these parents are not doing so. Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, was a young black lawyer in Atlanta stepping out of his car one evening, when he suddenly found a gun pointing at his head and a nervous white police officer shouting, “Move, and I’ll blow your head off.” Later Stevenson reflected:

I had the judgment to speak calmly to the officer when he threatened to shoot me. When I thought about what I would have done when I was sixteen years old or nineteen or even twenty-four, I was scared to realize that I might have run. The more I thought about it, the more concerned I became about all the young black boys and men in the neighborhood. Did they know not to run? Did they know to stay calm and say, “It’s okay”?

Stevenson embarked on offering training sessions at churches and community centers across the South for young black boys: if you are ever stopped by the police... the advice he gave was nothing with which Franklin Graham would have disagreed. More recently, New York mayor Bill deBlasio appeared on ABC’s *The Week* and told George Stephanopoulos: “And with Dante [his black son], very early on with my son, we said, ‘Look, if a police officer stops you, do everything he tells you to do, don’t move suddenly, don’t reach for your cell phone,’ because we knew, sadly, there’s a greater chance it might be misinterpreted if it was a young man of color. . . . We all want to look up to figures of authority. And everyone knows the police protect us. But there’s that fear that there could be that one moment of misunderstanding with a young man of color and that young man may never come back.” Ray Kelly, former NYC police commissioner commented, “I think when the mayor made statements about that he had to train his son to be -- his son, who is biracial, to be careful when he’s dealing with the police, I think that set off this latest firestorm.” Rudolph Giuliani also condemned deBlasio. So, it’s something of a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t situation. Graham’s words “Even if you think the police officer is wrong-- YOU OBEY” is apparently fine if it is delivered as a scolding, but disrespectful of the police if characterized as black survival training.

Barber et.al.’s open letter states:

In the nadir of your commentary, you tell everyone to “OBEY” any instruction from authorities and suggest that the recent shootings of unarmed citizens “might have been avoided” if the victims had submitted to authority. And you bluntly insist, “It’s as simple as that.”

It is not that simple. As a leader in the church, you are called to be an ambassador of reconciliation. The fact

that you identify a widely acknowledged social injustice as “simple” reveals your lack of empathy and understanding of the depth of sin that some in the body have suffered under the weight of our broken justice system.

The signatories don’t accuse Graham of racism (although a number of Facebook *trolls* do in the comment stream.) Most choose to believe that Graham wrote with the best interests of young black men at heart. What then is the nature of his offense? The open letter contends that Graham “oversimplified a complex and critical problem,” but I think that oversimplification is the wrong word altogether. Graham’s transgression was not one of degree, but of kind. He chose the *wrong* simplicity--the hurtful and unloving one.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who sat on the US Supreme Court from 1902-1932, once said, “The only simplicity for which I would give a straw is that which is on the other side of the complex — not that which never has divined it.” Holmes would affirm Graham’s desire for simplicity. Simplicity is a good thing, but according to the great jurist, no one can insist on just one simplicity; at least two exist, and all simplicities are not created equal. One simplicity exists on *this side* of complexity. It is naive. It is proud. It believes that it exists alone, and it believes that it is the only bulwark against the complexity that it fears above all else. It does not listen; instead it demands that all others “Listen up!” This type of simplicity, according to Holmes, is not worth a straw. By contrast, there is a simplicity on the other side of complexity. It has been conditioned in patience. Upon its first encounter with complexity, it humbly admits “I don’t know” (a phrase which Socrates claimed is the beginning of wisdom.) It then enters the complexity through listening and begins its journey to the other side. I’ve begun to understand complexity as a Garden of Gethsemane, a nighttime place of anguish and waiting. Peter, James, and John rejected the complexity by falling asleep-- “[Jesus] found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow” (Lk 22:45). Peter later chose the wrong simplicity by picking up a sword to defend Jesus. Jesus however walked through the complexity-- “if it be thy will”--and came out with the simplicity of the other side: “thy will be done.”

More often than not, the simplicity of the other side arrives at the conclusion: “Love, it’s as simple as that.”

That’s what is ultimately wrong with Graham’s comments. Anyone can take up the sword thinking they are truly defending God’s children, but the best they will likely accomplish is to chop off someone’s ear, like Peter did to the servant Malchus in Gethsemane (John 18:10). It takes love to stay awake, put down one’s sword, and journey with your brother through the complexity until you both reach the other side.

-A.O.B.